

Turning boys off? Listening to what five-year-olds say about reading

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Abstract

This paper reports the first part of a 2-year longitudinal study, which examined the impact of age of entry to school on the reading development of 60 summer-born boys during Key Stage One. The sample was drawn from 18 schools in six Local Education Authorities operating different admissions policies. Thirty-one had attended nursery part-time, while 29 had experienced full-time reception class before their fifth birthday and before statutory age of entry to school. The data offer an original portrayal of learning to read through the voices of a group of 5-year-old boys as they reflected on home and school literacy events relating to reading. Reading acquisition was examined within a theoretical model which incorporates attitudinal factors as intrinsic and defining components of reading literacy. The data draw attention to the centrality of these factors in the complex structure which supports the process of reading acquisition, acknowledging the need to investigate this process from the perspective of the child. This paper discusses the findings in the context of the boys' early years experience and the implications in the light of the widespread debate about age of entry to school and appropriate early years practice. The data suggest the current widespread skills-based approach to reading often ignores the crucial motivational elements that make a real reader and that the formality associated with this approach may be damaging reading attitudes in the youngest children of our reception classes.

Key words: reading attitude, age of entry, nursery, reception, summer-borns, 4-year-olds

Background

Conflicting pedagogies of reception classes

Seven years after the introduction of the Foundation Stage Curriculum Guidance (FSCG) (QCA, 2000), concerns about the appropriateness of the reception class environment for 4-year-olds are still being aired (Rogers and Rose, 2007). While the statutory age of entry to school remains at 5, most children now commence school at 4 and according to recent statistics 62% are in reception classes (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2006). In spite of a dearth of evidence in favour of this policy British children commence mainstream school far earlier than their European counterparts.

The controversy surrounding this provision centres on the disputed quality of reception as compared with nursery classes. Several studies drawing on data from the DfES-funded study, Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE), have suggested that "reception classes may not offer the best quality of provision for young children's early learning and progress" (Aubrey, 2004, p.636).

The reception class is the meeting point of two very different pedagogies. The assessment-driven demands of the KS1 curriculum encourage reception class teachers to adopt more formal methods of teaching and fuel the increasing emphasis on literacy and numeracy skills, inevitably eroding the play-based and child-centred curriculum of the Foundation Stage and exerting the "downward pressure of the more formal programmes of study" (Keating et al., 2002).

In spite of fundamental changes brought about by the introduction of the FSCG, tensions are unresolved. Previous research has addressed this conflict from various angles and much of the relevant literature has been recently reviewed (Rogers and Rose, 2007). The Rose review also recognised the tension of conflicting pedagogies, acknowledging concerns "about perceived pressures on practitioners in the Foundation Stage to adopt direct teaching which is more commonly associated with later key stages" (Rose, 2006, p. 32). Notwithstanding these pressures, and alongside a commitment to the importance of enjoyment, the report endorsed an early start to the reading process: "For most children it is highly worthwhile and appropriate to begin a systematic programme of phonic work by the age of five, if not before" (Rose, 2006, p. 29).

This paper offers a different perspective on this conflict by presenting the findings of a study which explored the viewpoints of children in part-time nursery and full-time reception classes, as they approached the task of learning to read. In doing so, the study makes a distinctive contribution to the growing body of educational research which recognises children as critical participants in the research process: "in order that their voices are heard and their viewpoints taken into account in the development of policy and the evolution of practices which are designed to involve them" (Nutbrown and Hannon, 2003, p. 117).

Can children read? Do they want to read?

Concern with raising standards has tended to sideline attitudinal and motivational factors that form a critical strand in the complex web of literacy acquisition. While the enjoyment of reading is generally acknowledged and accepted as an important objective in practice (DfES, 2003) within the educational establishment it is rarely addressed as an independent constituent of reading acquisition. Beyond these confines, Michael Rosen, the current Children's Laureate, echoes the views of many of his colleagues in his passionate and controversial call for a broader approach to learning to read: "We must, must have at the heart of learning to read the pleasure that is reading. Otherwise, why bother? You could learn phonics, learn how to read and then put it behind you and watch telly – you're given no reason to read. There are many ways in which people learn how to read; the idea that there is one way is an outrageous fib" (Pauli, 2007). Excellence and Enjoyment (DfES, 2003) certainly acknowledged the enjoyment of learning and teaching as a key principle but its discussion of literacy focused primarily on standards. The Rose review (2006) and the ensuing professional and public debate seem to have further marginalised the role of enjoyment and caused concern in some quarters (Wyse and Styles, 2007). Evidence suggests that since the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) in 1998, children's enjoyment of reading has declined in spite of improvements in children's reading achievement and confidence (Sainsbury and Schagen, 2004; Twist et al. 2004).

Theoretical models of reading acquisition have also tended to focus on the technical rather than the motivational aspects of the process. Flynn and Stainthorp (2006) have presented an integrated model for writing, in which attitude is explicitly addressed but reading attitudes are left implicit.

The research presented here differs from much of the current debate surrounding the teaching of reading, by placing children's attitudes towards reading at the centre of the process of learning to read. The paper will offer a theoretical rationale for this position, describe the methods adopted in the study and discuss the findings in the light of the ongoing debate about the teaching and learning of reading.

Why study reading attitudes?

International trends in reading research and classroom practice have reflected the waxing and waning of interest in the role of attitudinal factors. In the mid-1990s several large-scale studies (Bunbury, 1995; McKenna, 1995) conceptualised literacy not just as a set of skills to be acquired but in terms of reader attitude: "a literate person (child, adolescent or adult) is not only one who can read but one who chooses to read and who has established a habit of reading" (Bunbury, 1995, p. 7).

A number of theoretical models of reading acquisition were published in this period, proposing a key role for the attitudinal construct (Matthewson, 1994; McKenna, 1994; Rowe, 1995). Attitude was seen both as important in its own right and as a mediating factor to achievement. 'Positive associations' with reading were linked to more frequent and sustained reading which in turn is linked to higher achievement (Henk and Melnik, 1995). Data from the most recent PIRL study (Mullis Ina et al., 2007, chapter 4) confirms a consistent correlation between achievement and attitude in all countries involved in the study.

Attitude-centred models appear to have had little influence in the United Kingdom where government-led initiatives have been heavily influenced by a culture of targets and measurement. The discussion around the NLS has centred almost exclusively on raising standards and has, until recently, been challenged by just a few. "Enjoyment just doesn't feature in the list of things you have to do" (Pullman, 2003, p. 1).

The challenges associated with the measurement of attitude may partly account for its neglect in a measurement-driven educational environment. Young children's attitudes are thought to be unstable and given the very young age at which children in the United Kingdom begin school, the challenge of measurement is particularly acute. Notwithstanding, it is increasingly appreciated that their views as participants deserve to be heard (Nutbrown and Hannon, 2003).

In an international context, children tend not to enter school before their sixth birthday (Mullis Ina et al., 2004). Because interest in children's attitudes to reading is generally associated with the start of formal school the need for instruments to measure these attitudes in very young children has generally not existed.

In order to find an appropriate way to elicit young children's attitudes to reading, this study developed a new tool. The Photographic Reading Attitude Instrument (PRAI) is described in detail elsewhere (Lever-Chain, 2002, pp. 320–363) and was used alongside established measures to explore young children's attitudes to reading.

This paper focuses on qualitative data generated by the PRAI: it explores boys' early encounters with reading and compares how the contrasting settings of nursery and reception might impact on their attitude to reading at age 5.

Method

Participants

The study collected data from a sample of 60 summer-born boys whose first language at home was English. The boys were randomly selected from 18 schools in

six Local Education Authorities. Boys already identified as having special needs were excluded from the study. Twenty-nine of these boys had experienced a minimum of one but more often two or three terms of schooling in reception class. Thirty-one boys entered formal full-time school in Year 1 with no experience of the reception class. In spite of a trend towards centrally regulated educational experiences, admission policies are determined at local level. At the commencement of this study in 1998, it was possible to identify a number of LEAs in Southern England which still permitted children to enter school after their fifth birthday.

The sampling frame was designed to select a homogeneous sample; all the boys were summer-born, aged between 4 years 9 months and 5 years 1 month at the beginning of the study. Both gender and date of birth have been shown to be significant factors in school achievement (Brooks et al., 1998; DfES, 2001) so that the group targeted in this study, summer-born boys, was likely to be particularly vulnerable to the impact of age of entry to school.

Design of study

Data presented in this article were collected in the term before children entered reception class. For practical reasons, the sample was divided into two cohorts. The first cohort entered Year 1 in September 1998; the second cohort entered Year 1 in September 1999.

All the schools were contacted at the beginning of the summer term. Once consent for the boys' participation was obtained from their parents, arrangements were made to meet each boy twice, for a period of 30–40 minutes per visit. On each occasion the researcher explained to the boys that the purpose of the sessions was to find out as much as possible about what they knew about reading and in particular to explore their ideas and feelings about reading, where there were no right or wrong answers. The researcher explained and later reminded the boys that the activity was not compulsory. To maintain confidentiality pseudonyms were adopted and used throughout the reporting (R referring to reception class boys, and N to nursery class boys).

Measuring attitudes to reading

The construct of reading attitude adopted was based on a tripartite model of attitude developed by Matthewson (1994). This model incorporates three components of attitude: affect, cognition and behaviour. Affect refers to "the prevailing feelings about reading", cognition to "evaluative beliefs about reading" (including understanding the functions of reading) and behaviour to "action readiness for reading".

Eliciting children's views through the PRAI

The PRAI consists of 15 photographs and four line drawings (Figure 1); 16 of these illustrations represent reading situations familiar to children between the ages of 5 and 7, and three represent 'non-reading' activities (using a computer, playing outdoors and drawing/painting). The contexts identified by the PRAI exemplify what Moss refers to as contexts for 'school literacy' (Moss, 2007, p. 10) so that the definition of reading literacy as adopted in the study is one which is confined to book-related texts and ignores the range of other media linked to a wider type of reading literacy surrounding children in their day-to-day lives.

Children were asked to respond to these pictures on a three-point scale represented by smiley face stickers. The scale was administered individually; the children were told that no reading skills were necessary and that the goal was to find out what they felt about reading. The range of reading situations included reading alone; reading with an adult; reading with peers; reading at home; reading in school; reading to an adult; being read to by an adult; different types of reading material (comics/non-fiction/picture books/longer story books); reading with different people (mother/father/teacher/grandparent/brother/friend).

The responses were scored on a scale of 1–3 where 1 represented a dislike of the activity, 2 a neutral response and 3 a positive response. The possible scores ranged from a low of 16 to a maximum of 48. Responses to non-reading activities were not included in the total scores.

In addition to this attitudinal score qualitative data, drawn from verbal responses to the photographs, explored attitudes towards reading more deeply. During sessions of up to 20 minutes, the boys were presented with a selection of the photographs and were asked to describe how they perceived them. Informal, conversational interviews were thus generated, allowing these young boys to express their attitudes towards reading in a neutral and non-judgemental context. This open-ended and semi-structured situation provided ample opportunity to explore a range of reading experiences. These conversations were tape-recorded and 47 transcripts were later transcribed and analysed. Twelve recordings had to be discarded due to poor sound quality mainly as a result of excessive background noise.

The study adopted a view of literacy as a 'social practice' (Comber and Cormack, 1997) where context plays a critical role in defining the literacy as well as determining attitudes. It focused on the child's perspective of the reading activity, its setting and participants. Analysis of this qualitative data built up a picture of how a group of young boys understood their

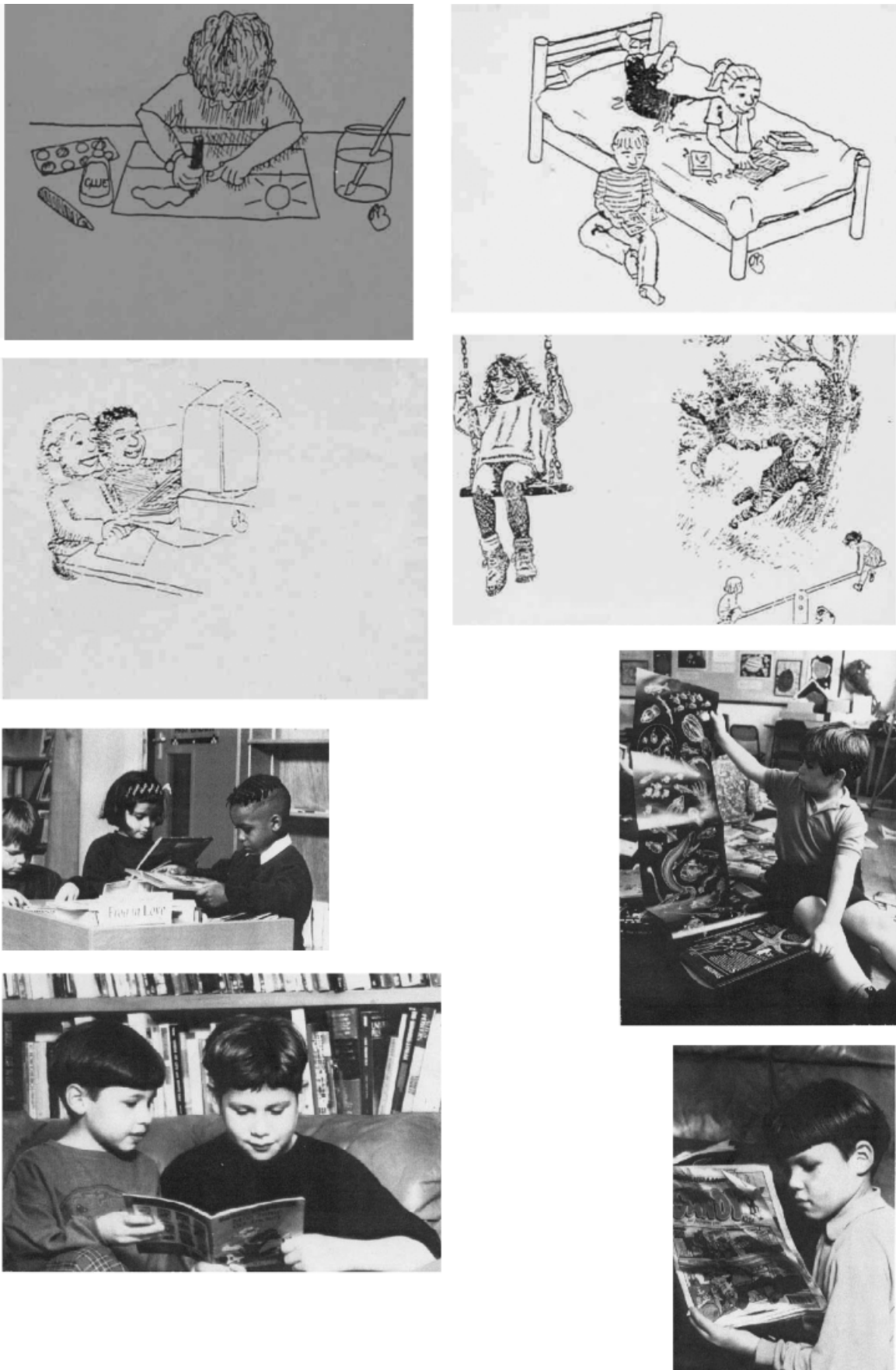


Figure 1: Photographic Reading Attitude Instrument



Figure 1: Continued

reading experiences and how this understanding affected their reading attitudes.

The PRAI was designed for use with children in the transitional period between home and school and the early years of school. Its pictorial format was a particular advantage in that it made no demands on children in terms of reading skills. The task was non-threatening and the boys particularly enjoyed the use of stickers. Although other reading attitude instruments were employed in the study, the PRAI uniquely covered the age span of 5–7 and was designed for use with a sample of British children.

Findings

Reading attitudes at 5

Scores from the PRAI collected from 59 boys in the term before entry to Year 1 are presented in Figure 2. Although attitudinal scores among young children frequently show a positive bias, the distribution of the PRAI scores suggests that children can discriminate when encouraged to consider a wider range of reading contexts. The results suggest that even before their fifth birthday children are beginning to formulate distinctive attitudes which do not conform to the expected positive bias. Approximately half the sample expressed negative or indifferent attitudes towards reading.

Following the classification of Chapman et al. (2000), boys with positive attitudes were identified as those scoring in the top 15% of the range of scores, while those with negative attitudes were defined as those in the lowest 15% of the distribution. In this way, four nursery and four reception class boys were identified as holding very poor attitudes towards reading before entering Year 1, while five nursery and four reception class boys held very positive attitudes. Their interview

transcripts were analysed for clues as to the roots of their views.

The analysis suggests that boys at the positive end of the attitude scale had less well-formulated feelings about reading. Their scores may have reflected young children's tendency to express positive attitudes in general rather than being driven by particular positive experiences with books. Weinberger suggests that the favourite book is a way of "gauging children's level of experience and interest" (Weinberger, 1996, p. 46) but three boys in the high-scoring group were unable to mention a favourite title. For these boys, positive attitudes had not been dented by negative experience but they did not seem to have been generated by positive experiences either. Two years later none of these three boys held positive reading attitudes. In contrast, those who were able to talk about specific books enthusiastically were still expressing positive attitudes towards reading at the end of Year 2.

Collin (N), one of the high scorers, though unable to cite his favourite book by name, explained that he liked the 'crocodile book' because of his 'snappy teeth' and mentioned the pictures as an important part of his enjoyment. Jim (R) was a regular library visitor and familiar with a wide range of titles including traditional fairy tales and favourites such as Thomas the Tank Engine. Jeremy (N), a high scorer although just below the top 15%, was quite clear that Elmer, a colourful picture book about an elephant, was his firm favourite. These vivid experiences with specific books seemed to lay the foundation for positive and lasting reading attitudes among a small group of boys.

In contrast, accounts given by some of the boys holding negative attitudes were far more explicit. This commentary was generated almost entirely by reception class boys. Alex (R) had the lowest score and was the most vehement. As he talked about "those children reading a book", Alex commented: "I don't like it", "it's stupid", "I hate it", repeating the expression "I hate" three times during the conversation. Joel (R), whose attitudinal scores suggested similar feelings to Alex, commented: "I only like it when my mum reads my own books to me". His enthusiasm for the illustrations contrasted sharply with his reluctance to read: "I have to learn to read". Harry (R), like Alex, did not enjoy listening to teachers reading stories and struggled with his own reading. Spelling things out seemed to dominate his reading experience which Harry described as both a 'hard' and a compulsory process.

Negative feelings about reading were to some extent, although not exclusively, associated with school-related reading and the process of learning to read. There was no evidence among the boys in nursery class that they had encountered similar negative experi-

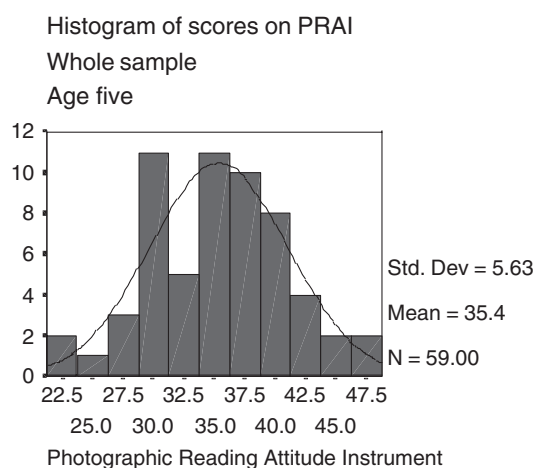


Figure 2: Scores on Photographic Reading Attitude Scale for whole sample

ences. Further analysis suggested that the school environment of the reception class was having considerable impact on both the cognitive and behavioural dimensions of reading attitude.

How do 5-year-olds understand reading?

As they reached the age of compulsory schooling, the boys in this sample had acquired explicit and wide-ranging ideas about why people read. The most frequently cited purpose for reading was that identified in previous studies of older children as 'enjoyment'. This function was suggested by almost all the boys; "They like reading books" (Harry (R)) was an expression repeated with slight variation throughout the transcripts. For some, the experience was expressed even more positively: children read because "It's lovely" and "He loves stories" (Saul (N)); "It's fun" (Rikki (R)). Only five children failed to make any reference to enjoyment as a purpose of reading, including three boys who were unable to suggest any function for reading.

Allied to the 'enjoyment' function but quite distinct (Neuman, 1980) was the alleviation of boredom. This was cited infrequently, mentioned by just three reception and two nursery class boys. The idea of reading in order to gain specific information was mentioned by one boy in each group, while two nursery boys described reading as comforting, falling into a category defined as 'escapist' (Greany and Neuman, 1983).

In spite of considering the main purpose of reading as 'enjoyment', about a quarter of the sample believed that reading was a compulsory activity controlled by adult-given instructions. The adult was often the teacher: "the teacher said they had to read a book" (Neil (N)) but frequently included 'mum' or 'dad'. One boy talked of both mother and father, on separate occasions, "making him do reading" (Arnold (R)).

Reading as a compulsory activity was often associated with expressions of negative feelings. Arnold had already formed a clear idea that he did not like reading. He resented being told to read and recognised this situation in several of the pictures he was shown: "He's looking at a book and his dad is telling him to read it and I don't like reading". Elsewhere he commented that he did not like it "when my mum tells me to read the books". His dislike emerged when he felt the task became compulsory and the responsibility his own. This contrasts with the pleasure he derived from books in other contexts: "I like it when I look at books"; "I like it when my teacher reads me a story"; "I like it when people look at a story with me".

The concept of reading in order to learn how to read was mentioned by a few boys in the reception class but did not appear in any of the nursery boys' transcripts. Perhaps this offered some evidence of the influence of

the very different goals which seem to have permeated the reception class curriculum.

A number of pictures offered the boys opportunities to talk about parent-child interaction around reading. Independent, compulsory reading for the purpose of learning to read radically altered the role of the parent. Among reception class boys, a highly didactic emphasis was placed on these sessions. "Mummy has to look at the book to see if it's the right word" (Harry (R)). "Cos they have to take them home and read them to their mum" (Matthew (R)). "[It's] a mummy with all the children . . . telling them how to read" (Henry (R)).

These data complement Spreadbury's findings (Spreadbury, 1995) which identified a change in the nature of parent-child interaction around reading during the transition to school. As the responsibility for reading was being transferred away from the parent, they, responding to school demands, became concerned with making their child an independent reader rather than one for whom reading was a pleasure.

According to the boys' views, reading had become a school task associated with standards which needed to be met. Ideas about their own competence had begun to form alongside concepts of task difficulty. Several boys, ignoring content, mentioned their preference for short and easy books. Matthew (R) had already formed an idea of his own capacity and limitations: "I can't read, only school books".

The degree of concern about older children's reading proficiency has been documented by Moss who reported that "anxiety about how children are getting on with reading is high" (Moss, 1999, section 1.1). She noted how children themselves become concerned with the extrinsic features of books as indicators of level. The data from this study highlight how early these anxieties are transferred to children and suggests that this is more marked in a reception class setting than in dedicated nursery classes. The themes characterising the reading attitudes of boys in reception class revolved around proficiency, the need to get it 'right', and compulsion, reading as a task to be accomplished for adults. These attitudes were generally not shared by boys in the nursery classes.

Conclusion

This study offers a portrayal of boys' attitudes towards reading when they enter Year 1 and suggests that these were affected by their previous educational environment (reception or nursery). There was clear evidence that the reception class environment had shaped boys' ideas about reading. By the age of 5, some boys were already viewing reading as a matter of proficiency; some regarded the task as compulsory and had begun to classify reading on a spectrum of difficulty. Reading had acquired school characteristics alongside the enjoyment function which they recognised, but from

which they did not necessarily benefit as they developed into the can/do's and can/don'ts of reading of Moss's classifications (Moss, 2007).

These early encounters with reading demonstrate the impact of the premature formality of learning within the reception class which has long been recognised. "External pressures often result in quicker implementation of a 'formal' literacy hour" (McInnes, 2002, p. 124). Fisher (2000) expressed concern over a model which denies teachers the opportunity to develop a curriculum which is developmentally appropriate for their class.

Findings from the Cambridge-based Primary Review have once again brought this issue into the public domain (Riggall and Sharpe, 2008). The authors challenge the appropriateness of the provisions offered by reception classes and identify a lack of correlational evidence linking early start to higher achievement.

More recently data from the IEA's PIRL study (Mullis Ina et al., 2007, chapter 4) based on its own index of reading attitude, confirmed that England has one of the largest groups of children with poor reading attitudes. Fifteen per cent of English children fell into this category compared to an international average of 8%. There has also been a significant down-trend in the number of children in England within the most positive attitude category since the previous data collection in 2001.

A range of explanatory factors must contribute to the trend, but data from this study may offer a glimpse of its earliest stages. The voices of boys who encountered reading as a target and the process of learning more as a hurdle than a pathway are clearly heard and should be added to the ever-increasing evidence for the need to safeguard the Foundation Stage from the inroads of Key Stage One.

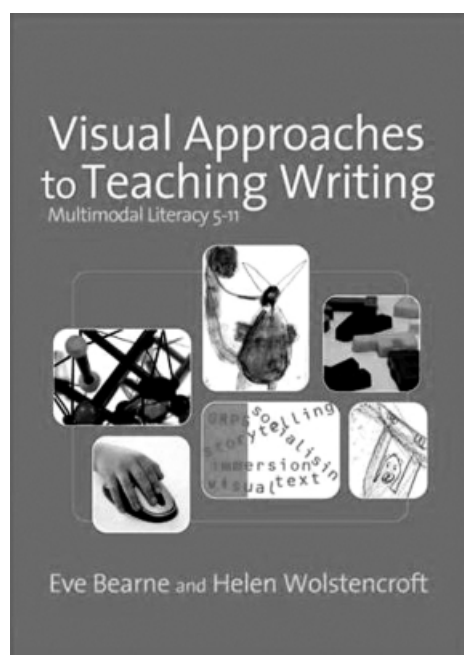
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